

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

[parks](#) - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

Testimony of David McCullough
Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands
U. S. House of Representatives
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Mr. Chairman. Let it be said for the record that John Adams was the driving force who made the Declaration of Independence happen when it happened, in the fateful first days of July, 1776; that while Thomas Jefferson was the pen of independence, John Adams was the all important voice.

His speech to the Second Continental Congress on July 1st, behind closed doors, was not only the greatest speech of his life, but one of the greatest in American history, in that it carried the day. In Jefferson's words, "[His] power of thought and expression...moved us from our seats." To Jefferson, John Adams was unquestionably the "colossus of independence."

In the aftermath of the Declaration, in the midst of war, no patriot traveled farther in the service of the American cause, over winter seas and mountain ranges, and often at extreme risk of life.

It was Adams, acting almost wholly alone and on his own initiative, who secured vitally needed support from the Netherlands to finance the Revolution - an accomplishment of almost superhuman determination and ingenuity, the benefits of which are almost beyond reckoning.

And in 1783, it was again John Adams, with Benjamin Franklin and John Jay, who negotiated the Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolution, established a new independent United States of America, and fixed our western boundary at the Mississippi. In all, it was as advantageous to our country as any treaty in history.

On June 1, 1785, two hundred and sixteen years ago this month, in one of the most memorable scenes in history, it was John Adams, a farmer's son, who stood before King George III as the first minister to the Court of St. James's representing the new American nation.

It was John Adams who was later elected our first Vice President. As the second President he was the first to live in the White House, the first to address a joint session of Congress here at the Capitol, and to his everlasting credit, at great risk of his political fortunes, he managed to avoid war with France when that would have been both popular and advantageous to his own career. History has shown it to have been a true "profile in courage." Adams himself would write to a friend, "I desire no other inscription over my gravestone than: 'Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of peace with France in the year 1800.' "

But there is more.

It was John Adams who drafted the oldest written constitution still in use in the world today, the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts enacted in 1779, fully ten years before our national Constitution. Moreover, the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts contains a ringing clause unlike that of any ever included in such a document before and that speaks to us eloquently today. It declares it the "duty" of the government to educate everyone.

It was John Adams, more than anyone, who championed the creation of an American navy. Indeed, if there was a father of the American Navy, it was Adams and his memory might well be honored for that alone.

He was, furthermore, the only founding father who never owned a slave as a matter of principle.

He was the first college graduate to become President, the first published author to become President, and he was besides, the husband of the extraordinary Abigail Adams, one of the most remarkable Americans of the time. And he was the first to father a President.

Beyond all that, it was John Adams as much as anyone who spoke for and insisted upon the balance of a three-part system of government - legislative, executive, and judicial - and he who stressed with a persistence equaled by nobody that there must be an independent judiciary.

Let us remember that the American Revolution was made by individual men and women who, by our modern way of seeing things, were very few in number. The war they fought was the most important in our history, as it gave birth to our nation and our free way of life.

But the revolution began well before the war. As John Adams observed famously, "The revolution was in the minds and the hearts of the people." He himself, in 1765, ten years before blood flowed at Lexington and Concord, declared to his fellow Americans:

Government is a plain, simple, intelligent thing, founded in nature and reason. Quite comprehensible by common sense...The true source of our suffering has been our timidity. We have been afraid to think...Let us dare to read, think, speak and write.

There was no American nation then, no army at the start of the war, no sweeping popular support for rebellion, no promise of success. Had they taken a poll in the colonies, the Declaration of Independence and the war would have been scrapped as unpopular. Only about a third were for the revolution, another third were adamantly against it, while the rest, in the old human way, were waiting to see which side would prevail.

No rebelling people had ever broken free from the grip of a colonial empire. Those we call patriots were also clearly traitors to the King. And so as we must never, never forget, when they pledged "their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor," it was in no mere manner of speaking.

We call them our Founding Fathers in tribute, but see them as distant and a bit unreal, like figures in a make-believe costume pageant. Or worse, we forget them. Yet real they were, as real as all that stirred their "minds and hearts."

In one of her most poignant letters to her husband in far off Philadelphia, Abigail Adams wrote, "I wonder if future generations will ever know what we have suffered in their behalf."

With the end of the war came the no less difficult and uncertain task of building a new nation. And in this, too, John Adams played a lead part. Indeed, it may be fairly said that with the exception of George Washington, no American played a greater part in winning independence and establishing a republican form of government than John Adams.

Yet curiously, sadly, unfairly, we have neglected him.

As a people, we claim to believe in giving credit where credit is due. But public acclaim and honor for John Adams is now more than two centuries past due. That such is the case is irrefutable and does not reflect well on all of us. But better late than never. It is time to do something about it.

And wouldn't it be fitting to move the measure to the House Floor before the July 4th recess? Timing is everything after all and the timing would be perfect.

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